

"It is much harder to judge yourself than to judge others."

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

FROM ANTISEMITISM TO 'PRICE TAG'

Moshe Ronen

How do we contend with foreign indictments of IDF officers?

What status should be granted to African refugees by Israel?

Should the authors of the book "Torat Hamelech" be punished?

Irit Kohn, President of the IAJJ, tries to represent the Jewish legal conscience

When the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists was established 44 years ago, its principal purpose was to fight against Holocaust denial and antisemitism and protect the values of the State of Israel using legal means. Throughout the years its activities concentrated primarily on these areas – however, today the leaders of the association are also weighing action against Jews who undermine its values.

"We approached the Attorney-General, Yehuda Weinstein, and asked him what he was doing about "price tag" operations", Adv. Irit Kohn, President of the Association, explains. "He told us that the Prime Minister gave express instructions to deal with the problem. In our naiveté, we thought that the opposite should be the case: it was the Attorney-General who was supposed to spur the Prime Minister to act against the phenomenon. We joined forces with Gadi Gvaryahu's 'Price Tag' association and we shall hold a seminar on the problem in September. We also want to refer to the book "Torat Hamelech" [The King's Torah] which in our opinion has badly influenced the "price tag" youth. We are considering joining the petition submitted to the High Court of Justice against the Attorney-General's decision not to indict the authors of the book".

Not only for Jews

The International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists was founded in 1969 by Prof. Renee Cassin, who drafted the UN Charter of Human Rights and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Justice Haim Cohn, Deputy President of the Israeli Supreme Court, and Arthur Goldberg, Justice of the US Supreme Court and US Ambassador to the UN. A few thousand Jewish lawyers and jurists are members of the Association, about half of them from Israel.

Do you also admit non-Jewish jurists to your ranks?

"Certainly", Kohn answers without hesitation. "There are a number of non-Jewish jurists in the Association who identify with its aims – particularly against antisemitism".

For many years retired Judge Hadassa Ben-Itto stood at the head of the Association. She succeeded in causing the Association to be awarded the status of a recognized NGO – non-governmental organization – in the UN institutions, including primarily the UN Human Rights Council. This Council, which has excelled at producing numerous anti-Israel decisions, is boycotted by the Government of Israel, and the Association's ability to participate in the Council's discussions and present Israel's point of view, allows us to pursue both directions: on the one hand to boycott, and on the other hand to make our positions heard: to go with and feel without.

The Association also has a permanent representative in the Human Rights Council in Geneva – Tom Gal, an Israeli who is writing her PhD thesis on International Law in Geneva, and who alongside her studies represents the Association before the Council.

Concurrently with protecting Israel, the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists is also active in the UN Human Rights Council in relation to human rights in other places in the world: women who have been raped in India; the humanitarian rights of refugees who fled from Syria to Turkey and Jordan; the rape of women during demonstrations in Egypt; and opposition to arms shipments to Syria.

In its activities in Israel, the IAJLJ also deals with domestic human rights issues, such as the matter of the refugees and work migrants coming from Africa to Israel. It held a conference on the issue – and drafted a bill relating to refugees which was sent to the Ministry of Justice.

"It would be wrong to ignore the problem of the refugees in Israel", Kohn says. "Israel signed the Refugees Convention many years ago, and it must comply with it. As a first step it is necessary to examine every refugee and find out whether he was persecuted in his own country or whether he has only come to Israel in search of work. If he was persecuted, he must be given the status of a refugee."

Who will perform this complex examination?

Kohn: "In the Ministry of the Interior there is a special department for refugees; 57 officials work there. The manpower exists. The time has come to examine each case on the merits. We conducted research in cooperation with the Committee Against Torture on how refugees and work migrants are being absorbed in other countries. We proposed setting a quota, absorbing those present here and awarding them a status until the situation in their countries has changed. The present situation is very difficult particularly when we are talking about the Jewish people, a people which itself was the victim of persecution and deportation."

Hasbara [public diplomacy] in Madrid

Every year the Association convenes a world meeting on an issue within its area of interest. This year the conference will be held in October in the "Peace Palace" in The Hague, the seat of the International Court of Justice. The conference will deal with the functioning of the International Arbitration Tribunals and the International Criminal Court.

There are there countries in which it is possible to try the citizens of other countries for crimes against humanity. IDF officers may be arrested there in consequence of complaints made by Palestinians. Are you active on this matter?

"At the request of the Spanish Ambassador, we held a seminar in Madrid in order to explain to Spanish jurists about the work of our Supreme Court. If they become convinced that there is an effective penal system in Israel which tries unjustified harm to the residents of the territories, the Spanish legal system will not act. We did this in consequence of the trial that was held in Spain against Israelis for the 2002 targeted killing of Salah Shehade, head of the Hamas military wing, in his home in Gaza using a bomb dropped by a war plane, in which innocent by-standers were also killed by mistake."

Who can join your Association?

"Any jurist who identifies with its aims and who is willing to pay the annual membership fee – 100 dollars. Jurists who are civil servants pay only 50 dollars".

Are there Jewish lawyers from many countries in the Association?

"About half are from Israel – and the others are from the rest of the world. They are active within the framework of the Association vis-à-vis the Ministries of Justice in their countries. Thus, for example, we approached the Ministries of Justice in France and Greece when antisemitic activities occurred there. We always do this in cooperation with the local Jewish communities."